What is this GAY COMMUNITY SHIT?

sasha soldatow

Published February 1983 in Sydney by Sasha Soldatow.

Typeset by Rat Graffix.
21 Shepherd Street, Chippendale NSW 2008.

Printed by Panacea Press.
5 Knox Street, Chippendale NSW 2008.

POLITICS HAS GONE DOWN MARKET.

Every now and again the Sydney gay scene experiences a shock. It happened in 1978 with the Mardi Gras riot. It happened again at about 1.30 on Saturday morning 29 January 1983 when the Darlinghurst cops busted Club 80.

Every time something like this happens gays and others are genuinely outraged. People are mobilised into action. Meetings are held, demos organised. Disparate and schismatic gay groups come together in an apparent display of solidarity.

One of the things that has happened over the past few years is that the gay movement has coalesced into a so-called Gay Community supposedly representing the entire spectrum of homosexuality in big inner-city ghettos like Sydney. This monolith has been constructed predominantly by men – the Gay Community liases very little with lesbians. So the structures by which it has chosen to regulate itself

reflect little of the debates and alternative organisational experiments of, say, the Women's Movement, the lesbian left or the splintered remnants of libertarian anarchism. Instead this Community has regressed into traditional parliamentary-rules-type debating procedures with motions and rights of reply etc. In other words a heirarchical order under the guise of democratic participation.

This represents an ideological shift. In the process many things have been debased, not the least of which is the idea of politics. We are told this is a political Community which on the surface talks of the oppressed, the dispossessed, the illegal, the hated, the dangerous, the sexually active, the marginal, the young, the powerless etc. Yet at the same time gay politics has become an unholy alliance between a newly-emergent strengthened class of business people – the gay capitalist, and the so-called gay activist. It is a fusion of left and right whose main thrust is towards conservatism. The gay left (insofar as it can be truly said to exist) actively supports an exploitative status quo. Politics for the gay left has come to mean little more than the lobbying of politicians. That and manipulating mass meetings. They have become as corrupt as the worst 'left wing' trade union officials hungry for power.

The Gay Community is in fact dismantling a whole history of radical political action in Sydney. I don't think it is doing this totally consciously. The Gay Community's reactions are issue-specific. Something happens to poofters and the Community reacts. Specifically it reacts because poofters are involved. If it were not a poofter incident, gays would not care a fuck. Can anyone point to an instance where they have?

Oxford Street, the Cross, Darlinghurst and the Darlinghurst cop shop present a unique environment. This uniqueness is historical. In a sense the inner-city of Sydney has always been an environment of confrontation between authority (legally and illegally corrupt) and the forces of rebellion. From the time of the Rum Hospital to the present day it represents one of those environments where corruption officially controls and rules. That is precisely why it is so attractive to misfits. That is why we congregate there. The environment is dangerous. This is where rules are broken. We are drawn here because we also break the rules. Yet we don't want to be bashed up.

The inner-east of Sydney is a gangster's paradise. Out of control. Anything goes. Murder and rape. No rules. Pay up or disappear. Answer back and get bashed. Stay silent. Enter at your own risk. Above all you must fear the place and the people around you. It is the politics of threat.

Yet this is also the poofter's paradise. A small piece of land they call their own. Men come from miles away to gawk and gaze, to drink and be picked up. To fuck while looking over their shoulders. To be sucked

off. To zip up at the slightest noise. To be ready to leave at a moment's fright. You learn to recognise the provocateur and to be wary of the exploiter and the police. And yet they congregate in their thousands these men looking for companionship and sex. So they want somewhere safe.

It is comforting to think of this place as your community. We must protect these places, you say, make them legitimate, keep them going. This is where you go to have fun. You fantasise about the place, pull your dick at night thinking about it. Twleve-year-olds run away to here. Drug addicts and drunks pass out in these gutters as you hail cabs to take you home. You might have come off in one of the suck and fuck joints. You might be taking a guy home. You've been drinking or blowing a few J's, amyl or coke if you're flush. You're just a small particle in the big scene.

Ten years ago I found the idea of a community of gays attractive, necessary even. In searching out people of my own sex to whom I was attracted, it was necessary to have places in which to meet. I remember the gay world of 15 years ago – isolated, furtive, splintered, too discrete

to be open and too scared to be political. If you had any political leanings you went into the counter-culture, smoked dope, dropped acid and talked earnestly about revolution.

I remember being impressed by the first feminist attacks on this ultra masculine form of leftism. I was drawn to a feminist analysis long before gay liberation hit the scene. Feminists were confronting the established left from the outer and in a funny way I felt their attacks contained the substance of my own dissatisfaction. Leftist men used women and hated poofs. An alliance was inevitable. Unfortunately an alliance based solely on being hated cannot be of any lasting value. In the early seventies the issue soon came to a head and women and gay men split – a division from which the gay movement has never fully recovered.

I am an anarchist. Simply this means that I am against any imposition of authority be it from the State or from elsewhere. If it affects my freedom or the freedom of others then I believe that those concerned must have their say in the structuring of their lives. I applaud people who break rules becuase I do so myself. This is a necessary and important activity. Usually it is a rear-guard action often born of frustration. Our enemies are more powerful than we are. They have the cops, they define and control the system of justice and they own the things we want.

CLUB 80

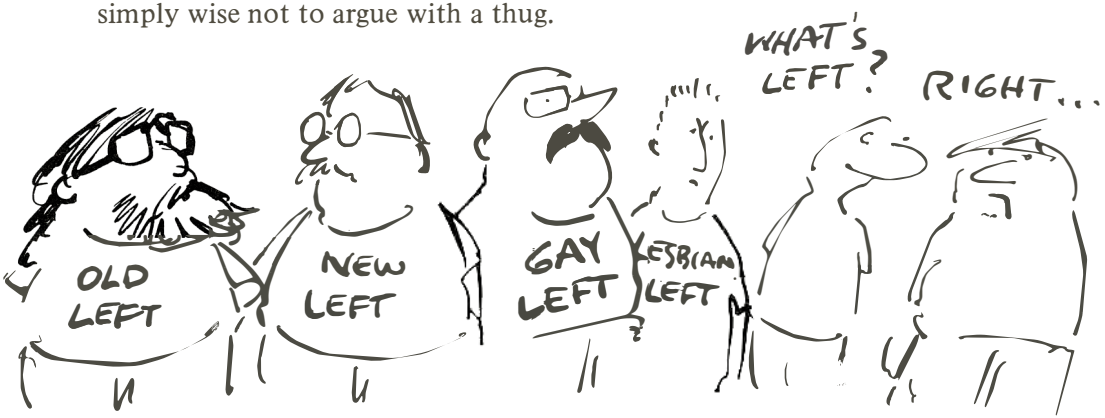
Club 80 is one of a number of gay establishements run as a private club without an alcohol licence. In common parlance it is a fuck and suck joint.

This is the story as far as I can reconstruct it. At about 1.30 on Saturday morning three members of the vice squad entered the premises of Club 80 allegedly acting on a complaint that liquor was being sold in an unlicensed bar. Their manner was threatening. This provoked a deal of hostility from the patrons of whom there were about 300 at the time. Faced with this the cops radioed for reinforcements and soon another 15 or so cops arrived from Darlinghurst cop shop with two paddy wagons. They then proceeded to take the names, addresses and details of work place of all the patrons. Their manner was rude, aggressive and still threatening.

Those patrons who could not furnish proof of identity were taken to Darlinghurst station and detained there. This amounted to about 30 people. There 6 people were charged – 4 with indecent assault under section 81A of the Crimes Act, the notorious anti-homosexual section, one with causing serious alarm and affront and one with being a neglected child exposed to moral danger. All were then released except for

the 17 year-old juvenile who was taken to Minda Remand Centre where he was kept until his court appearance on Tuesday morning. On Saturday night while at Minda he was beaten up by the other boys. By all accounts this guy is quite street wise and did not let on to the other kids why he was being held. It appears that word got to the other boys through the staff there. One member of staff who supposedly stood by while the guy was being bashed has been suspended by the Regional Director pending an investigation.

The police action that morning was not only provocative, it was also highly illegal. Around the Cross and Darlinghurst however this is not uncommon – the cops run the area. Unless an arrest is being made, the cops have no rights to detain anyone. And although it has become an established practice supported even by lawyers themselves, there is also no obligation on any member of the public to furnish the police with their names and addresses unless you are being placed under arrest. In actual fact it is quite legal in NSW to give any name whatsoever unless by doing so you are intending to break the law. You are most certainly not required to give your place of occupation. Often, however, it is simply wise not to argue with a thug.



Since Camp started in the late sixties and Gay Liberation hit the scene in the early seventies, gays have become Big Business. Where there is money to be made there will always be crime. This is axiomatic.

The gay bars and clubs began to proliferate in the areas around Oxford Street in the seventies as organised crime began to change its focus from its concentration on prostitution and illegal gambling to drugs and sex shops. The demise of US R&R reduced the need for easily available heterosexual sex. The land boom of the seventies destroyed the older more established communities of the inner-east and replaced them with more affluent younger singles. Bourgeois young gay entrepreneurs were quick to see the commercial potential, speeding up

the process and giving gay capitalism a respectable face.

My impression is that over the last ten years organised crime has been slow to recognise the potential of poofters. I identify three distinct moves.

1. Individual buildings already under the control of the mob changing their function e.g. from illegal gambling to gay bar. This is an old tactic. Once established, organised crime is remarkably flexible. And resilient.
2. An ancilary development which began to develop and exploit the gay potential of the area. The change in housing I have already mentioned. The change to be seen in pubs, however, has been more recent. There are now very few old-style pubs to be found in the area. Although in human terms the tactics of this transferance have been reprehensible, the business aspect seems to be reasonably legit. The gay tourist trade has contributed a certain stability to these ventures as has investment by straight professionals.
3. The move to saunas and fuck and suck joints.

BLACK MARKET SEX

Because of its history of oppression and repression, homosexuality has always had its hidden side. In the past quick anonymous sex was to be found in beats and toilets. The trend recently has been to take this indoors. The environment is safer and it can cater for a more specialised fetish-image based sex. Although they appear to be recent developments, historically they are just a continuation of old-time bawdy houses.

The problem in Sydney with saunas and suck and fuck joints is that the patrons are vulnerable on two counts.

On the one hand these venues are not totally legal. This leaves them always open to police harrassment. On the other hand they are open to the manipulations of organised crime through the various pressures which can be exerted on the proprietors. Fires are not all that popular this season. Arrests and intimidation by the police are useful alternatives. The client is caught in this alliance between organised crime, the police and the courts, an alliance which is intimate, essential and very active. The person who suffers is the poor sucker who wants a fuck.

AN ATTACK ON THE GAY LEFT

On Sunday after the bust at Club 80 a meeting was held at the Sydney Gay Centre to discuss further action. The gay left was pathetic.

There is a problem in terminology here. By gay left I mean those people gathered at the meeting who would probably be better classified

as professional gay activists. The real left left in droves as activists sold out to gay buisness in 1978. Remember how outside the cop shop after the 1978 Mardi Gras riot the gay movement actually considered not bailing out anarchists and spartacists? Remember how at the meeting at the Stanley-Palmer Centre the mass meeting voted narrowly to defy the Summary Offences Act and stage an illegal march? Only to be defeated when "political gays" (using parliamentary democratic meeting procedures) asked people to think again and vote afresh? Remember how people who spoke against the second motion were branded heterosexuals? Remember how arrested gays did not want their names printed in the newspapers pleading a special privilege because they perceived themselves as vulnerable and discriminated against? Remember how libertarians took a stand against censorship, arguing that courts were open to all including journalists and that to place restrictions on information dangerous? Remember how incensed the people were standing outside Central Court when the cops in fact closed the courts? And remember how in 1978 there were lots of women involved. And then the women left in droves.

As I said earlier, an unholy alliance has been forged between gay capitalists and gay activists. I don't care a shit for the capitalists – I think they stink. But the activists need to be taken to task.

The gay movement has never been strong on interpreting what happens. I used to think this was because they were silly. I now see it as their intention.

This is the way the Club 80 bust was interpreted. The cops were stupid in coming in the first place. When faced with a crowd of 300 potentially angry poofs they overreacted. They sent for reinforcements and then proceeded to abuse their powers.

In fact there were a number of very good reasons why the cops would want to raid the joint. Given the opportunity the police around that area are always on the lookout for ways to test and extend their powers. In the Club 80 case the following factors need to be considered:

1. There is a new state Attorney General, Paul Landa. For a while the police will push him to see what stand he is prepared to take in relation to police powers. Landa voted for the repeal of anti-homosexual legislation and he has the power to direct the police to drop charges. Given that the police hit four men with section 81A, a section that everyone has been led to believe was a dead law, the confrontation with Landa is direct.

2. There is some tension between Anderson, the Minister for Police, and Cec Abbott, the Commissioner. Again, a similar power play.

3. Since its abolition, the police have consistently called for the reintro-

duction of the Summary Offences Act, arguing that they now have fewer powers of arrest. Using the Crimes Act is a way of underlining this point.

4. The police get pissed off when their power is challenged or curtailed by agencies they have no control over such as the Ombudsman. An effective challenge by poofs riles them.

5. There is always constant pressure to "do something about the Cross". Different groups simply take turns. This time it was the poofs. Last time it was the Darlinghurst prostitutes. Before that – runaway kids. The story repeats in cycles.

6. It is quite clear now that the mob (politely termed in the business as "the club") now controls most of the gay territory. Club 80 seems to be unaligned. Now I don't know if Club 80 pays protection money but the incident on Saturday morning is consistent with the way organised crime works when it wants to incorporate an area into its sphere of influence.

This sort of information was missing from the debate on Sunday. It would of course not come from the gay businessmen who want to protect their investment. It should have come from the gay left but it also didn't. They were far too interested in maintaining their own tactical position within the Gay Community. For, apart from their alliance with gay business and thus by association with their clientel, they have no power base. But with this power base they can snow a meeting to believe that they have skills which are useful. Such as that absurd shit about it being better to have people who are practiced at meeting with politicians to go as representatives of the Gay Community otherwise the politicians will run circles around you. Well, they met with the politicians and, guess what . . .

If you take a very narrow view of what happened at Club 80, the whole thing was very shocking. That is the Gay Community's attitude. But if you look at it from a wider perspective of what happens nightly at the Cross, nothing much really happened. A few people were intimidated, some were detained, six were arrested. The charges will in all probability be dropped.

The only really disturbing fact is that a guy got bashed, that this was in a remand centre run by the government, that it was occasioned by staff playing on the homophobic tendencies of the other kids and provoking the bashing.

So what will the Gay Community do about institutions such as Minda? And while we're at it, jails etc. Nothing much I'd say. They're not terribly concerned about communities outside their own. They've got their heads too firmly stuck up the arse of Oxford Street.

After the 1978 Mardi Gras a number of people got together to write an alternative interpretation of the events of the Saturday night confrontation with the cops. The following leaflet was distributed in roneoed form. It was written collectively by a group of Anarchists.

POOFS, LEZZOS AND THE STATE.

The Saturday night confrontation with the cops in the Cross, the Sunday morning demonstration in front of the Darlinghurst cop shop, and Monday's demo at Central Court are some of the most important actions taken by homosexuals in many years.

These actions were important because they were direct confrontations with the authorities involving disobedience, anger and violence.

Some homosexuals have been horrified by the 'police brutality' and 'poofta bashing' on both Saturday and Monday. What has outraged these people is that having sought and received permission to take to the streets, the coppers could then turn on the marchers, trap them, arrest and bash them and create such ugly scenes.

There is, particularly in the Gay Solidarity Group, quite a deal of indignation.

If the cops had not confiscated the official truck and removed the PA system, they argue, the organisers could have prevented the march continuing illegally. They could then have proceeded to direct the marchers into Hyde Park where they could sing and frolic joyfully into the night.

This is just fuckwitted.

There has been a tendency since the Summary Offences Act came into force in 1971 to assume that the law in relation to demos should be respected. Also, among the homosexual movement there has been a general tendency to respect the whole parliamentary-legal-democratic system of governing that we live under. So any demo that turns violent or goes beyond the bounds of its permit is seen to be a failure.

Did the organisers of the Gay Solidarity Mardi Gras think:

1. that by asking for permission from the state, police confrontation could be avoided?
2. that by assuming the role of controllers, police involvement and confrontation could be minimised?
3. that by being festive and creating an inviting 'mardi gras' atmosphere, defiance, anger and rage could be deflected and controlled.

The fact of the matter is this. Any time that people take to the streets, whether legally or illegally, this constitutes an act of provocation. The real nature of this provocation can be partly hidden by having marshals or by playing rock-n-roll, or by the illusion of legality. However, when this provocation is realised, no control can stop or restrain this spontaneous action.

That is what happened at College St. People decided, as they almost always do towards the end of a frustrating demo, that rather than stop they would continue up William Street and into the Cross. The cops didn't like this and nor did the organisers. BUT THE PEOPLE DID. SO THEY WENT.

At this point the march changed direction. What had started off as a homosexual march then turned into a confrontation by homosexuals against the power of the state.

In the confrontation at Darlinghurst Road, no specific anti-homosexual laws were invoked by the cops even though the demonstrators were behaving in a manner which under different circumstances would have led to their arrest. Instead, the cops used street offences.

Why did the police react so strongly? This is a question that has been asked by many.

At the outset it needs to be pointed out that the police did not react substantially differently to the way that they have behaved on past demonstrations. The cops exist to protect certain interests of the state, not for the protection of human and legal rights. Any threat to those interests, in this case the demo, will bring out whatever powers are found to be necessary to control or destory the opposition. There were also a number of other reasons:

1. The coppers probably can't handle homosexuality. Their masculine roles are largely invalidated and their sexuality threatened. Sexual repression is the basis of much anger.
2. The police have traditionally run the Cross and see it as their own private domain.
3. The police hate Wran and used this demo as an opportunity to embarras him.
4. The cops probably reacted strongly because of the tight solidarity of the crowd, its militancy and the actual amount of violence being given back to them.
5. Other people from the Cross and bystanders were beginning to express their hatred for the cops and getting involved. A full scale riot was definately on the cards at one point.

Moral indignation concerning citizens rights in these circumstances is a naive indignation. Laws are never made on the streets, but that is where they are always carried out.

People outside Darlinghurst cop shop on Sunday morning were stunned that lawyers and doctors were not allowed to see those arrested, and that bail and charges were not set for many hours. This is no isolated occurrence but happens many times every day throughout the state. However, what was unique was that there were lawyers, doctors and money (over $5 thousand) available. Our organisation and solidarity was the equal of the states.

There have been some real advances resulting from the action of those three days. People who were not previously 'political' have become involved. There has also been the expression of solidarity so needed for any action to continue. For the first time in many years women and men have come together in a common action with very little of the sexist shit that has dogged the movement. For the first time in many years there has been the possibility of the participants having equality within the movement.

For a brief moment the police united us. However, now that the police have gone and we are off the streets, a kind of bourgeois calm is threatening to take over.

There is talk again of the old law reform tactics. It is as if the experience of the police lock-out of the courts on Monday has taught us nothing. The lock-out proved in no uncertain manner that whatever the law, the police are above it. Not only will they use any law which is convenient for them to bust you, they will also control the execution of that law. The cops are not into such niceties like justice should be seen to be done. The magistrates at Central had no control over their own courtrooms. Wran, even though he is the minister in charge of the police, has no control over the cops. If there is a conflict in the justice system, the cops have shown themselves to have ultimate power. And yet people are still pressing for law reform.

The fact of the matter is that the interests of the demonstrators is different to the organisers. In fact, the situation is developing into a repeat of the Gay Lib fights of 4 years ago. Demonstrators who chanted "Stop police attacks on gays, women and blacks" know that unless you have a broader political perspective, seeing homosexuality as another deviant and discriminated group in society, you're going to get into bourgeois acceptance. The energy that was there on the street did not come out of committees, yet parliamentary debating rules and the desire for respectability is dissapating this radical energy. And some of us are getting really pissed off.

Before the 1980 Mardi Gras there was considerable debate as to how political the Mardi Gras should be. This was a reflection of the changing ideological perspective of the gay movement generally. The following piece was broadcast on Gay Waves, 2SER FM on 9 October 1980.

COMMENTARY

My name is Sasha Soldatow, and I want to have a look at some of the issues being raised at the moment on the subject of the Gay Mardi Gras.

I don't think there is a need to spend much time defining what the confrontation is all about. For me, it is a simple matter of power and control.

The sides are quite clearly drawn.

On the one hand there is the group of people who are usually described as the broad left. This group consists not only of lesbians, but also includes many homosexual men. Generally speaking, this group is pushing for a politicised mardi gras, a celebration which will express and take a stand on various issues of exploitation and oppression.

In opposition is a group which I would define as the conservative, right wing of the homosexual community. Their thrust is to make the mardi gras a festival of gayness, a celebration which will include all aspects of the gay community without regard to political conviction. From my observation this group is composed almost exclusively of gay men.

The contentious issues are therefore those of sexism, racism, exclusion and participation – all of them being divisive issues. So there is a lot of mud-slinging and a lot of name-calling. The right threatens that lesbian blood will flow in the streets and categorises their opponents as just a bunch of dykes, and the left attacks this mysoginy, this hatred of women, and mocks the political naievety of those who support the exploitation of gays by gay capitalists, and the hidden triumverate of men, money and the mob.

If there is anything positive to have come out of the Gay Mardi Gras meetings so far, it is this fact – the gay movement can no longer indulge in the pretence that it is cohesive. If you go to the meeting at Heffron Hall next Wednesday night, one thing is certain. You will be seen as an enemy or a friend – it is as simple as that. The lines, as I have said, are clearly drawn.

Now, what interests me here is not the nature of the confrontation itself, but rather the fact that this confrontation is happening at all. To put this slightly differently, why is it that the left and the right wings of the homosexual movement both identify the Mardi Gras as somehow coming under their own sphere of influence. Both sides obviously believe that the mardi gras somehow belongs to them.

Now, this is not the popular left-wing understanding of the conflict. The left-wing's analysis goes something like this: the impetus for the Mardi Gras emerged from some kind of understanding of gay oppression and gay rights as formulated by the left. It was organised by the left and has shown itself, through its short history, capable of being a radical and radicalising event. Enter the right wing and the gay capitalists. Using all the power and resources at their command, the right has launched a concerted offensive to take over the Mardi Gras for their own uses (whatever these may be).

This analysis is wrong.

Most organised groups in our society are notorious for ignoring or misrepresenting their own history. It is always more convenient to forget. The left wing of the homosexual movement is no exception. No-one to my knowledge has presented an analysis of this present conflict over the Mardi Gras in historical terms.

I would have thought this to be essential. Isn't it one of the basic tennets of socialist practice to learn from the past and apply this knowledge to the present and the future? No-one has looked at the way the present events grow quite naturally out of the last 3 years celebrations. Well, lets try.

This is my analysis.

The first Gay Mardi Gras was held in Sydney in 1978. The intention was for a happy throng of costumed gays to march festively, accompanied by music and dancing through the streets of Sydney. The atmosphere was to be gay, carefree and lighthearted. The merry crowd would then assemble in Hyde Park where they would continue to sing and frolic joyously into the night. That's what was planned.

The Mardi Gras was also to have a political aspect. Now I think it is important to dwell for a moment on these political intentions for they are revealing. Politically the Mardi Gras was to be a celebration of gayness and a celebration of coming out.

That was it. Very political. Whako.

Oh. I forget. To have a successful Mardi Gras, you need to attract lots of people. The organised left, being what it is, is more than conscious of needing to create a power base. Lest it be misunderstood, a power base is simply a lot of people who will turn up and do what they're told to do by the organisers and their lackeys the marshalls. It doesn't really matter where these people come from, whether they're politically on side or not. Of course it would be wonderful to be able to attract real western suburbs working class gays. But, oh heck, if they don't turn up, anyone will do – right wingers, fascists, christians, sexists, mysogynists, exploiters and oppressors – anyone, as long as they're out on the street. Getting people to turn up is, wait for it, also political. Ho hum.

In the event, the intervention by the state changed the course of the whole celebration. In what I now imagine is seen as an extremely ill-considered move, the cops attacked. The participants of the Mardi Gras reacted to this provocation and their mood changed to anger and then to disobedience. The organisers and their lackeys, it should be noted, turned traitors and sided with the cops. They tried to control the crowd, dangling the carrot of rock-n-roll, dancing and singing in Hyde Park. It didn't work. The people decided differently and the people marched.

Now I consider this to be a crucial moment. If there are Marxists listening, they can correct me if I am wrong. But in my estimation, the moment when the Mardi Gras crowd decided to march on and did not stop at Hyde Park where they were told to, constitutes a spontaneous mass action. It is this event which gave the Mardi Gras its veneer of radicalism. It was this action which expressed the politicization of the crowd. In fact, it was during these moments of near riot when the political understanding of the Mardi Gras participants went far ahead of the political consciousness of the organisers. For a while, the people were in control of their actions. For a while, a common purpose united the crowd. And the organisers did not like that one bit. Because these actions had very little to do with the Mardi Gras. Because the Mardi Gras was never meant to be *that* political. And everyone knows that politics is about control and power and not about anarchy.

So what happened over the next couple of months was a slow disappation of the radical energy generated by the Mardi Gras. Things got bogged down in motions and counter motions and points of order. And the organisers, who had some idea of a correct line, stayed. And the bulk of interested gays who only had common sense got bored and left. Which left the organisers to restructure the whole event according to their original intentions.

The second Mardi Gras was a complete sell-out of the left by the left. There was no point in chanting "Get your laws off our bodies" when there was not in fact a cop in sight. There was no need for cops – the organisers had seen to it to provide marshalls who, well, behaved like cops didn't they. And "Stop police attacks on gays, women and blacks" became rather hollow when, during the chant a marshall came up and physically shoved you back into line. You began to wonder who was attacking who. And even the relatively innocuous "Out of the bars and onto the

streets" became meaningless. The march had police permission to march only as far as halfway up Oxford Street. There the marshalls and organisers did the cops dirty work and dispersed the crowds where? Off the streets and into the bars of course. Is it any wonder that the right wing sees the Mardi Gras as somehow belonging to them. After all, the left organisers have done everything possible to encourage their participation, under the guise of involving non-political gays.

I am surprised that people on the left forget that capitalism has this fantastic ability to renew itself, to take over radical opposition, defuse it of its political significance and transform it into something that can make money.

As a final point, I am reminded of what one of the most sensible people in the world, the American feminist Ti Grace Atkinson, said on the occasion of Nixon's visit to China and his meeting with Mao Tse Tung. While left wing intellectuals debated the significance of this historic occasion, she simply pointed out that everything was very clear – the left had better find new friends.

In the case of the Mardi Gras confusion, the left had better work out who its friends actually are. I mean, honkytonks, really, if you lie with dogs, you get up with fleas.